

The Global Crisis: Movements for Economic Justice
The Experience of Claiming our Future in Ireland

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Introduction

In this brief presentation I want to first focus on civil society. I will focus on the legacy of the boom times in terms of the state of civil society as we transitioned into crisis. I will then look at how civil society has experienced the crisis and the challenges now faced by civil society. I will then present and briefly assess the emergence of Claiming our Future.

Claiming our Future aspires to be a social movement. We seek a society based on the values of equality, environmental sustainability, participation, accountability and solidarity. Claiming our Future comprises individuals and organizations from a wide range of sectors including environmental groups, community groups, equality organizations, trade unions, social justice organizations, cultural groups and global justice groups.

Claiming our Future emerged from an event held in Dublin in October 2010. It aims to identify alternatives to current strategies in response to the economic crisis, to build popular support for these alternatives and to develop a movement to demonstrate this support and achieve impact.

The Legacy of the Boom

As with so many of our problems, the problems for civil society lie in the boom times.

The boom left us with a civil society that was well resourced, well connected, highly visible and, apparently, a player in building that new, exciting, prosperous and deeply unequal 'Celtic Tiger' Ireland.

The boom also left us with a civil society that had become:

- A service provider, rather than an advocate or mobiliser, which was highly dependent on state funding.

- A partner of the state, rather than an advocate or mobiliser, which was entangled with the state in problem solving on the basis of strict and limiting parameters set by the state.

This was a civil society that was silo based into different sectors and fragmented within these different sectors. There was only a limited sense of identity as civil society with few shared visions that went beyond the narrow fragmented issues of individual organizations.

The skills base of the sector was largely technocratic. The key skills in the sector were those of policy analysis and those of management. Agendas were set on this technocratic basis and the national/local linkages that had previously served agenda development within the sector were broken.

The Experience of the Crisis

The experience of the crisis has raised questions as to whether civil society is now fit for purpose. It is currently often reduced to competing with itself for survival. At times it can mobilize protest at some of the more extreme austerity measures. It has not yet engaged effectively in shaping the Ireland that should emerge from the crisis.

This is, of course, first and foremost an economic crisis. Austerity is the governmental tool of choice to respond to this, with cuts to the public sector and to public sector funding. Despite the constant mantra that there is no alternative it is clear that this does involve choices, choices that will shape Irish society long into the future. The key choice made is that of reducing the role of the state. This bodes ill for redistribution and for those who live in poverty. It bodes ill for a development model that might be sustainable.

Another choice made is that of whittling away the funding that had been made available to civil society. This poses particular threats to the community sector in its role of service provider. Community and voluntary organizations struggle for survival and ultimately become the conduits for austerity into their communities.

However, this is also a political crisis. We now have a politics that takes pride in being able to take the hard decisions. These hard decisions are in effect to cut the

living standards of those living in poverty. This is a politics newly determined to resist the influence of vested interests – where such vested interests are defined as the disadvantaged.

This is a political system no longer interested in partnership. This poses threats to civil society that had made partnership its core purpose. Civil society is now without a partner beyond the most limited forms of engagement with the state.

Finally, this must also be seen as a cultural crisis. Equality and social justice do not have popular traction as a value base for society. This is almost inevitable given how civil society had evolved over the boom time. The theme of ‘There is no alternative’ dominates public discourse and fetters all imagination around a different future. This fettering of the imagination is also evident in civil society. The media also offers virtually no space to the articulation and debate of alternatives.

Ultimately civil society itself is in crisis. There is the obvious and visible crisis of funding and funding cuts. However there is a deeper crisis of purpose, strategy and organization. What is its role now that roles of service provider and partner are increasingly curtailed? What strategy could be deployed in this new and harsh context to advance equality and social justice? How to organize in a viable and effective manner for this new context?

Some initiatives are evident in the trade union and community sectors to explore the nature of this crisis in civil society and to come up with some perspective on these questions. However, overall, the response to this deeper challenge is limited and has virtually no support.

Claiming our Future

Claiming our Future is not the answer to this crisis in civil society. There will not be one answer. However it is part of the struggle to find these answers.

The starting point for Claiming our Future is cross-sectoral work. It grew out of a dialogue between ‘Is Feidir Linn’ (a loose network of people involved in community, equality, anti-poverty and social justice issues), the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, the Community Platform, the environmental network, Tasc and Social Justice Ireland. A broader range of individuals and organizations have

linked into Claiming our Future since then from these and other sectors. A number of actions are being devised to deepen this cross-sectoral engagement and the relationships involved.

The organizations involved in Claiming our Future provide resources, channels of communication into their memberships, access to their work on alternatives and activists to enable Claiming our Future to progress. The various committees, working groups and events of Claiming our Future are all structured to secure this cross-sectoral participation.

Secondly, Claiming our Future seeks to be a public space for deliberation. It has held two large deliberative events each year. These are spaces for people to participate and engage in debate. These events are not conferences and have no speakers. People are facilitated in tables of ten with a consensus system to establish the broad consensus on the issues under discussion at the tables.

Thirdly, Claiming our Future is primarily focused on opening up a popular dialogue on alternatives over and above any negotiation with the powerful. The key challenge is to secure greater popular traction for the values and policy themes prioritized by Claiming our Future.

This prioritization happened at the inaugural event in October 2010. This drew over one thousand people to the RDS in Dublin. One hundred tables, of around ten people each, debated the value base and the priority policy themes for the new movement.

A consensus was achieved around a value base that encompassed equality, environmental sustainability, participation, accountability and solidarity. Six policy themes emerged as priorities – a sustainable economy which serves society; reduced income inequality; change in the way we govern ourselves; decent and sustainable jobs; reform the banking systems; and reform of public services.

Work has progressed on the first three of these policy themes. Deliberative events have been held to establish the parameters of each theme, the type of change required and the actions that could be taken. A cross-sectoral working

group has been established for each theme to take up the issues identified at the deliberative events and to develop actions to progress the theme.

Conclusion

Claiming our Future has made slow but positive progress. It is hard to break old habits. Each sector has its own way of doing things, of talking about things and of defining its interests. Silos are hard to break down in the best of times. In a context of crisis, where people and organizations tend to turn in on themselves and go back to what they know best, this is even more complex. Civil society has got a taste for talking to the powerful. The ability and interest in turning its attentions to the general public can be of less interest.

It is hard to convince people to look beyond agendas of survival. It is not easy to convince people that there could be an alternative. There is no strong tradition of imagination, of visioning a future, and of taking the long term perspective to draw on.

However it might not be easy but it is our only hope. Movement building will be key to civil society rediscovering its purpose and strategy. It is the only hope for the wider society as civil society, rather than any other part of society, will lead the pursuit, discovery and implementation of alternatives for a more equal, participative and environmentally stable society to emerge from this crisis.

Movement building requires imagination, engagement and investment from all who espouse these values.